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The Wisdom of Discipleship
Proverbs 4:1-27 Sermon

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My college pastor took an interest in my spiritual growth. He met up with me for lunch, we did a Bible study together with some other guys, he listened to my concerns and prayed for me, he led me on a missions trip, and he paid for my plane ticket to go to a Christian conference He invested in me and he mentored me. He became one of my spiritual fathers. A spiritual father or mother is someone who comes alongside you and walks with you in your faith, helping you study the Bible and pray, and encouraging you in your walk with Jesus. He discipled me.

If you could have that would you want it? Would you want a more mature man or woman in the faith to come and mentor and disciple you? This could be someone older, or younger, but the key is that they have walked this path before, it's not that they have it mastered, but they can help you on your way and maybe you can teach them something too. This is discipleship.

Today in Proverbs 4 we find a biological father who is also the spiritual father to his son. This is not always the case. You can have a spiritual father or spiritual mother who is not your biological parent. But in today's Proverb, we find a father who is both. The reason he turned out this way is because he too had a spiritual father and mother who discipled him, his parents.

> **Proverbs 4:1-3**
> 1 Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction;
> pay attention and gain understanding.
> 2 I give you sound learning,
> so do not forsake my teaching.
> 3 For I too was a son to my father,
> still tender, and cherished by my mother. (NIV)

Discipleship is when one person pours God's words and ways (God's wisdom) into another person to help them know and follow Christ. Often that person pours into a third person and so on and so on, multiplying discipleship. Here we see discipleship beautifully illustrated in a family. A father is teaching his sons what his parents taught him. That's three generations of discipleship. That's three generations of studying God's Word and living in God's ways.

Do you want a spiritual father or spiritual mother? Do you want to be discipled? This isn't a theoretical question. Pray about it this week and if you want one come back next week and we will find you one. Maybe someone comes to mind. Go talk to them. Ask them, "Will you meet with me regularly to pray, study God's Word, and talk about life?" We all need discipleship.

We all need a spiritual father or mother. (v1-9)

Our pattern in Proverbs has been a father writing to his "son" but in verse one he's writing to his "sons." It's plural. Maybe we shouldn't make too much of it but at the very least this father is hoping for his teaching to multiply. He desires for his teaching to go to all his sons and his son's sons, his grandchildren. He expects his teachings to form his sons and daughters and that they too would become spiritual fathers and mothers to their biological and spiritual children (aka. anyone else they disciple).

Now as I broaden the scope of what it means to be a disciple-maker I also don't want to be too quick to downplay the **family mandate** Proverbs 4 is laying out for dads and moms. Remember chapter one?

> **Proverbs 1:8**
> Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
> and do not forsake your mother's teaching. (NIV)

God has called dads and moms to be the first ones to teach their kids the Word of God and the ways of Christ Jesus (Eph 6:4). In January the Elders and myself introduced a discipleship pathway—which is a way we can all try to make sure we're growing in our faith. One of the key elements of our discipleship pathway, is "Prayer & Bible Study" but the pathway explains that one element further by adding this is both "personal" and "family." We grow by studying God's word personally and as a family. This lines up exactly with our Children's Ministry Team's mission.

> The Children's Ministry team is tasked with coming alongside parents and families as they strive to raise, teach, and disciple the children God has graciously given them. Our church feels the weighty responsibility of supporting families, teaching truth, and providing opportunities for children and families to serve in our congregation and community.

The children's team recognizes that you are the first person God has called to disciple your child. He may have also called your youth leader, or kid's Sunday School teacher, but none of them have as much time with your children as you do. As we spend time discipling our children, Lord willing, one day they will pass on their faith to their children.

> **Proverbs 4:4-5**
> 4 Then he (my father) taught me, and he said to me,
> "Take hold of my words with all your heart;
> keep my commands, and you will live.
> 5 Get wisdom, get understanding;
> do not forget my words or turn away from them. (NIV)

This father is quoting what his father told him. When we're deciding how to live out our faith the first person we're going to naturally copy is the ones who had the biggest effect on our lives, our parents. As parents, that strikes the fear of the Lord in our hearts. If we're not discipling our kids, who will? "Do what I say but not what I do?" Or rather, "Do what I say and what I do." If you're a parent, God is calling you to actively teach your child God's wisdom (God's Word and God's ways).

> **Proverbs 4:6-9**
> 6 Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
> love her, and she will watch over you.
> 7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.
> Though it cost all you have, get understanding.
> 8 Cherish her, and she will exalt you;
> embrace her, and she will honor you.
> 9 She will give you a garland to grace your head
> and present you with a glorious crown." (NIV)

The message his father told him was simple. Seek to understand the Scriptures and live your life that way. Wisdom will keep you out of trouble. Wisdom will lead you on the right path and reward you. And now he's passing this message along to his sons.

For some of us we may have kids who have decided not to walk in the way of wisdom. We tried really hard to share our faith with them but they've done their own thing and all we can do is watch. Proverbs are principles—not promises. You've done your part. It's up to your son or daughter to decide. All we can do is pray for them, trust the Holy Spirit, and offer wisdom when God gives us the opportunity.

But what about those of us who don't have Christian parents or whose parents are gone or who just won't do this? No matter what age you are, God can provide you with a spiritual parent or mentor to guide you on your way. Think to the New Testament and the Apostle Paul's relationship with Timothy. Timothy had a Christian mother and grandmother who taught him the faith but he also needed Paul.

> **2 Timothy 1:5** I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. (NIV)
>
> **2 Timothy 2:1-2** You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. (NIV)

Paul became a spiritual father to Timothy but he expected Timothy to become a spiritual father to the men and women of his church—to pass along the teachings of Christ Jesus. Whose your Paul? And whose your Timothy? Whose discipling you and who are you discipling? Who can you receive from and who can you pour God's Word into? *We all need a spiritual father or spiritual mother.*

When we went to the Habitat for Humanity work day in June, Bill from Billerica oversaw our job that day. Bill had lots of experience working in construction. He was retired and volunteered with Habitat to help build houses. He showed me how to drill a hole in the cement flooring in the basement so they could install a sump pump. First he showed me, and then I got on the power drill, and then I did it. He left me and I worked for a couple hours on it. Then Jared, our old Cornerstone intern who just finished college, finished working on the upstairs and he came to help me. So I showed him exactly what Bill had shown me and then he did it. First Bill learned, then Jonathan, then Jared, and if we'd been there long enough maybe Jared would have shown Bernie how to do it.

It's no different with discipleship. First I learn, then I pass it along, and then the person I pass it along to passes it along to someone else. My college pastor poured God's Word into me and now I'm pouring into three college guys and I hope they'll pour into others. Instead of drilling down into cement flooring we are drilling God's Word down deep into our human hearts, which sometimes can be harder than concrete. Discipleship is not easy or clean. It's messy. It's about people. How could it be anything else? But as we receive discipleship and give it to others, we will grow in what it means to be a follower of Christ. Why is this so important?

We all need a spiritual father or spiritual mother to help us find the way of wisdom. (v10-19)

Once again we are given two options for how to live—the way of the foolish or the way of the wise.

> **Proverbs 4:10-17**
> 10 Listen, my son, accept what I say,
> and the years of your life will be many.
> 11 I instruct you in the way of wisdom
> and lead you along straight paths.
> 12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered;
> when you run, you will not stumble.

13 Hold on to instruction, do not let it go;
guard it well, for it is your life.
14 Do not set foot on the path of the wicked
or walk in the way of evildoers.
15 Avoid it, do not travel on it;
turn from it and go on your way.
16 For they cannot rest until they do evil;
they are robbed of sleep till they make someone stumble.
17 They eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence. (NIV)

If this passage sounds familiar that's good because it's actually a lot like chapter three. Once again the author Solomon is contrasting the two paths, wisdom and folly. He calls his son to listen to and hold onto instruction (v10-11, 13). This isn't just any instruction, but instruction based on God's Word. He was to study all the Hebrew Scriptures available at that time and we are to study the whole Bible today. So if you want to walk in the way of wisdom you got to read the book.

I've recently learned some basic sign language for the song Jesus Loves Me. Monica and I try to sing it to our child. I'm not sure you could call what I do singing or signing. When we sing "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so" the sign for Bible is signing Jesus, which is touching the nail marks and then palms together and then open like opening a book. The Bible is Jesus' book. But notice when you sign Jesus' "book" you have to open it for it to be the book. God's Word will be without power in our lives if we never open it. What would your sign be for the Bible? Is it opened or closed? Let's open God's word so we can guide our family, biological or spiritual. The reward is that if our children choose to walk in it, God will protect them from wickedness. But not only that. Any who choose the way of wisdom will walk in the light and in the path of righteousness.

Proverbs 4:18-19
18 The path of the righteous is like the morning sun,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.
19 But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble. (NIV)

The word stumble is used three times to describe the way of the foolish. There's only pain that way. See there's a close connection between wisdom and the tangible physical world, which we see next. The way of wisdom may be spiritual but it's not abstract. It's not invisible but seen. Wisdom is concrete and real. As we read notice all the different physical body parts.

Proverbs 4:20-27
20 My son, pay attention to what I say;
turn your ear to my words. (**ear**)
21 Do not let them out of your sight, (**eyesight**)
keep them within your heart; (**heart**)
22 for they are life to those who find them
and health to one's whole body. (**body**)
23 Above all else, guard your heart, (**heart**)
for everything you do flows from it.
24 Keep your mouth free of perversity; (**mouth**)
keep corrupt talk far from your lips. (**lips**)
25 Let your eyes look straight ahead; (**eyesight**)

fix your gaze directly before you.
26 Give careful thought to the paths for your feet (**feet**)
and be steadfast in all your ways.
27 Do not turn to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil. (**feet**) (NIV)

It's what we do with our ears and hearts and eyes and mouth and lips and feet that helps us grow more wise or more foolish. It's not just about keeping the bad out but also bringing the good in.

- **Ears** - I want to protect my ears from gossip. If someone comes up to you and starts talking negatively about someone else say, "Stop! Is this gossip? If so, let's say something positive about them." Then you're not only protecting your ears but filling them up with encouragement.
- **Eyes** - I want to guard what entertainment I watch and fill my sight with creation, family, and beauty. So that may mean skipping past that Netflix show or turning the TV off and playing games with your kids.
- **Body** - I want to protect myself from laziness and gluttony and fill myself with good foods and diligence. That means not only not laying around all day but getting a job or volunteering so I can serve others.
- **Mouth/Lips** - I want to prevent my own mouth from speaking gossip or lies and want to fill my mouth and speak grace, truth, and encouragement. Who can you speak an encouraging word to today? Who can you tell "You know I really appreciate this about you?"
- **Feet** - I want to not walk myself into tempting situations at the shopping center or work or anywhere else but use my feet to bring a needy person or a friend a meal or share the gospel news.
- **Heart** - My heart is the center of my identity. I want to guard the core of who I am by filling myself up with wisdom. Who am I putting into my heart? Christ or the world?

The only reason we can begin to do this is because Jesus laid down his ears and eyes and body and mouth and feet and heart for us. He offered himself up as an exchange. His body for ours. His righteousness for our wickedness. His wisdom for our foolishness (1 Cor 1:30). His death for our life (Col 3:3-4). If you want wisdom don't leave here trying harder. Repent of your sins and invite Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit to come and work on you and then find a spiritual parent to help you grow.

We all need a spiritual father or spiritual mother to help us find the way of wisdom. I've had several mentors, spiritual fathers, the last couple years. It's always been worth it to make the time to meet with them and reflect on what God is doing in my life and theirs. We pray. We encourage each other. We seek God together. If you get someone to disciple you, you may be surprised by what God does. *We all need a spiritual father or spiritual mother to help us find the way of wisdom*.

Jonathan Romig preached an earlier edition of this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA on July 20th, 2019 when he served there as pastor. You can download a PDF copy at archive.org or read it online at Substack. Jonathan attended Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS) where he earned his Master of Divinity (M.Div) and Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) degrees.

Discussion Questions

Questions for small groups, Bible studies, or personal devotionals:

1. What are a spiritual father and mother?
2. Why do they matter for our spiritual maturity?
3. Who is discipling you and who are you discipling?
4. How is discipleship practical, and not just abstract?
5. How did Jesus perfectly walk the way of wisdom for us?

Resource Recommendations

Some of the links in this manuscript are affiliate links ("aff link"), which means we get a small percentage if you purchase the resource through the link. We recommend checking out your local library or thrift store.

How To Read Proverbs (affiliate link) by Tremper Longman III

The Book of Proverbs by BibleProject

Free Sermon Notes Worksheet (PDF)

Proverbs Sermon Series

Go through the Proverbs with Jonathan Romig in this sermon series: Everyday Wisdom

Endnotes

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (NIV)

You can watch this sermon on YouTube.